Venice *Biennale* 2026

In Minor Keys — A Guide Curated for You by Shelley

DATES

9 MAY – 22 NOV 2026

EDITION

61ST INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION

THEME

IN MINOR KEYS

CURATOR

KOYO KOUOH (1967–2025)

PART ONE

What Is the *Venice Biennale?*

A Brief History

Every two years, the Venice Biennale transforms Venice into a living museum. It is the oldest and most prestigious international art exhibition in the world, and one of the few events that can genuinely claim to matter — not just to the art world, but to culture at large.

The Biennale was established by a resolution of the Venice City Council in 1893, originally proposed to celebrate the silver wedding anniversary of King Umberto and Queen Margherita of Savoy. The inaugural Biennale took place on 30 April 1895, with the King and Queen in attendance. The first edition boasted 516 works and attracted approximately 225,000 visitors, quickly establishing itself as a vital source of international cultural exchange.

1895	First International Art Exhibition opens in Venice. 16 countries participate, 225,000 visitors attend.
1932	Venice Film Festival founded — the first film festival in history — as part of the Biennale.
1980	First International Architecture Exhibition launched, alternating with the Art Biennale.
1999	Dance added to the Biennale's six disciplines: Art, Architecture, Cinema, Dance, Music, Theatre.
2026	61st edition. 99 nations. 7 first-time participants. The most controversial edition in decades.

Why Does It Matter?

Think of it as the Olympics of the art world — but instead of competing in sport, countries compete in ideas. Each nation builds or rents a permanent pavilion in Venice and fills it with an artist or group of artists they consider to represent the best of their contemporary culture. The stakes are real: winning the **Golden Lion** award can transform an artist's career overnight and define how a country is seen on the world stage.

Beyond the competition, the Biennale is simply the largest gathering of international contemporary art on the planet. This year, 99 national pavilions participate, with 7 countries making their absolute debut — among them Guinea, Qatar, Somalia and Vietnam. For artists, curators, collectors and critics, this is where careers are launched, reputations are made or lost, and the direction of contemporary art is argued over. For the rest of us, it is a rare chance to experience an extraordinary diversity of artistic voices in one of the world's most beautiful cities.

A note on 2026: This year, for the first time in the Biennale's history, the Golden Lions will be awarded not by an expert jury but by **popular vote** — open to any ticketholder who has visited both main venues. More on why below.

PART TWO

The Politics *of 2026*

This year's Biennale has been one of the most controversial in living memory. Three separate storms broke before opening day, making 2026 an edition that is as much about politics as it is about art — which, perhaps, is exactly as it should be.

The Death of the Curator

The theme *In Minor Keys* was conceived by **Koyo Kouoh**, a Senegalese-South African curator and director of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town. She was widely regarded as one of the most important curatorial voices of her generation — thoughtful, politically engaged, deeply committed to amplifying voices from the Global South. She passed away suddenly in May 2025, before her Biennale even opened. The exhibition went ahead in her honour, with her vision preserved intact by her team. Visiting this Biennale is, in part, an act of tribute to her.

🇷🇺

Russia

Russia has not participated since launching its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. At the 2024 Biennale, Russia handed its pavilion building over to Bolivia without making any formal statement. This year, Russia announced it would return. The backlash was fierce — over 200 participating artists signed an open letter demanding exclusion. In the end, a compromise was reached: Russia's pavilion is closed to the public for nearly the entire run, with its project *The Tree Is Rooted in the Sky* visible only via video screens on the exterior. The Ukrainian pavilion, meanwhile, brought to Venice a sculpture evacuated from a park in Pokrovsk as Russian forces approached in 2024.

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Israel

Israel was absent in 2024 — its selected artist and curatorial team chose to keep its pavilion shuttered in solidarity with those affected by the Gaza conflict. This year, Israel returned with a new exhibition in a different location from its usual pavilion building. More than 200 participating artists signed an open letter demanding its exclusion, citing human rights abuses in Gaza. A further letter also called for the exclusion of the United States over its war in Iran. Italy's Culture Minister publicly supported Israel's participation and personally called its artist to express solidarity.

⚖️ The Jury Resigned — Nine Days Before Opening

The most dramatic moment of the entire Biennale season came nine days before opening day. The five-person jury — led by Brazilian curator Solange Farkas — resigned en masse. Before resigning, they had published a statement declaring they would not award prizes to countries "whose leaders are currently charged with crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court." The statement named no countries, but was universally understood to refer to Russia and Israel — whose leaders face ICC charges. Rather than back down, the Biennale's leadership accepted the resignations. The Golden Lions are now awarded by public vote, with all ticketholders eligible. It is the first time in Biennale history that the prizes are decided democratically.

PART THREE

The Theme — *In Minor Keys*

What does it actually mean?

In music, a minor key tends to evoke something quieter, more melancholic, more inward — as opposed to the loud, triumphant feeling of a major key. Curator Koyo Kouoh borrowed that idea and applied it to art and to the world we're living in right now. The theme is a call to **slow down and pay attention to the smaller things** — the undercurrents, the overlooked voices, the quiet details that shape our lives just as much as the big dramatic events. Instead of art that shouts, Kouoh wanted art that whispers. Instead of spectacle, she was interested in atmosphere, grief, memory, tenderness and the textures of everyday life.

It is also a political stance: a resistance to the endless noise of outrage and crisis, and an invitation to ask what we notice when we turn the volume down. For visitors, the best pavilions this year tend to draw you in slowly — through sound, through intimate spaces, through things that ask you to look carefully rather than just be impressed. **You don't need to know anything about art to feel it. You just need to be willing to stop for a moment.**

PART FOUR

Top Pavilions — *The Giardini*

All Giardini pavilions are included in the standard Biennale ticket (€30). Open Tue–Sun, 11am–7pm; Fri–Sat until 8pm. Closed Mondays except on specific dates.

AUSTRIA · GIARDINI

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Seaworld Venice

Florentina Holzinger

WHO IS SHE?

A Viennese choreographer and performance artist in her early 40s, Holzinger has spent the past decade making theatre that pushes the human body to its absolute limits. She is a major figure in European contemporary theatre — known for work involving extreme physicality, nudity, stunts and body horror — and this is her first major art world commission.

WHAT WILL I SEE?

Holzinger has turned the Austrian Pavilion into something that is simultaneously an underwater theme park, a sewage treatment plant and a sacred building. The work is a dizzying, immersive, confrontational exploration of climate change, technology and a flooded, dystopian future. Performers are live in the space every day, alongside site-specific performances taking place across Venice and its lagoon.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The single most talked-about pavilion of the 2026 Biennale. It connects viscerally to Venice itself — a city literally sinking into the sea. Be prepared for something unlike anything you've seen before.

> *⚠ Content note: contains nudity, bodily fluids and intense live performance. Not for everyone, but unforgettable.*

GERMANY · GIARDINI

Ruin

Sung Tieu & Henrike Naumann

WHO ARE THEY?

Sung Tieu is a conceptual artist who wrapped the pavilion's neoclassical façade in a trompe-l'oeil mosaic referencing a socialist-era housing block in Berlin where the artist once lived. Henrike Naumann was an installation artist who drew on her own upbringing in East Germany; she passed away before the Biennale opened, making this a posthumous presentation of her work.

WHAT WILL I SEE?

An exhibition about what happens when parts of history disappear — buildings get demolished, regimes collapse, whole ways of life are erased. It draws from vanished GDR landmarks and "phantom spaces" to ask: what do those gaps do to a society? What are the ghosts that remain?

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The pavilion folds Germany's Cold War domestic memory into the country's ideological sediment — but its questions are universal. Given that Naumann died before seeing her work presented here, there is something deeply poignant about the pavilion itself.

UNITED KINGDOM · GIARDINI

Predicting History: Testing Translation

Lubaina Himid

WHO IS SHE?

Born in Zanzibar in 1954, Lubaina Himid is one of Britain's most celebrated painters, known for a practice that addresses race, history, feminism, cultural memory and identity. In 2017, she became the first Black woman to win the Turner Prize. She is the third Black artist in a row commissioned to represent the UK at Venice, following Sonia Boyce in 2022 and John Akomfrah in 2024. She is also a professor emerita and has spent decades championing overlooked Black artists.

WHAT WILL I SEE?

The pavilion's six rooms are transformed with large, boldly coloured paintings and sculptural installations. Across her work, overlooked histories and marginalised voices return to visibility, unsettling established accounts of the past.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

For English teachers, this pavilion is especially resonant — it is deeply interested in language, translation, and the stories we tell (and suppress) about ourselves and each other. Himid's work is warm and generous even when its subject matter is painful.

JAPAN · GIARDINI

Grass Babies, Moon Babies

Ei Arakawa-Nash

WHO ARE THEY?

Ei Arakawa-Nash is a Japanese-American performance artist, born in Fukushima and based in Los Angeles, who continuously works with others to destabilise fixed identities and subjectivities. Their work is playful, collaborative and full of pop cultural references, and they have cited Kusama's guerrilla performance at the 1966 Biennale as an inspiration.

WHAT WILL I SEE?

A participatory installation featuring 200 baby dolls. The work draws on the experience of raising children as part of the Asian diaspora in America and references a 1962 Japanese film about early childhood. Visitors are invited to interact with the space rather than simply observe it.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

One of the gentler, more joyful pavilions — but underneath the playfulness are serious questions about parenthood, cultural identity and what we pass on to the next generation.

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NORDIC COUNTRIES (NORWAY, FINLAND, SWEDEN) · GIARDINI

How Many Angels Can Dance on the Head of a Pin?

Klara Kristalova, Benjamin Orlow, Tori Wrånes

WHO ARE THEY?

Three artists working across sculpture, installation and performance: Finnish artist Benjamin Orlow, Sweden-based Czech artist Klara Kristalova, and Norwegian artist Tori Wrånes. Each brings a different voice, but all three draw on folklore, mythology and the natural world.

WHAT WILL I SEE?

The pavilion transforms the iconic Sverre Fehn-designed Nordic building into a site of sensory compression, where sound, sculpture and memory coexist in a constantly shifting environment. The title draws on a medieval philosophical question about coexistence — opening onto reflections on living together in an increasingly divided world.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The Nordic Pavilion building itself is one of the most beautiful in the Giardini — designed by the great Norwegian architect Sverre Fehn, it lets trees grow through its roof. The combination of the architecture and an exhibition steeped in myth and folklore makes this one of the most atmospheric stops in the whole Biennale.

AUSTRALIA · GIARDINI

conference of one's self

Khaled Sabsabi

WHO IS HE?

Khaled Sabsabi is an acclaimed Australian multidisciplinary artist born in Tripoli, Lebanon in 1965. He fled Lebanon's civil war as a child and has lived in western Sydney since 1976. For over 35 years, his practice has explored human collectiveness, identity politics, social justice, and the impact of ideology. His work is deeply rooted in the experience of migration and the search for shared humanity across cultures.

THE CONTROVERSY

This is a story worth knowing before you walk in. In February 2025, Sabsabi and his curator Michael Dagostino were announced as Australia's representatives for Venice. Within days, a series of newspaper articles implied that two early-career works could be read as glorifying terrorism — specifically a 2007 portrait of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and a 2006 video response to 9/11, both made in the context of serious artistic inquiry into violence and Middle Eastern politics. Australia's arts funding body, Creative Australia, rescinded its appointment within a week.

The backlash was immediate and fierce. The arts community condemned what was widely described as both inept and cowardly handling of the issue. Sabsabi described the experience as "really, really devastating — physically, intellectually and emotionally," and said a "cloud of misinformation" had been allowed to go unchecked. Many observers argued that the controversy arose simply because the artist happens to come from a Middle Eastern background. After an independent external review found serious governance failures, Creative Australia publicly apologised and reinstated Sabsabi and Dagostino in July 2025.

WHAT WILL I SEE?

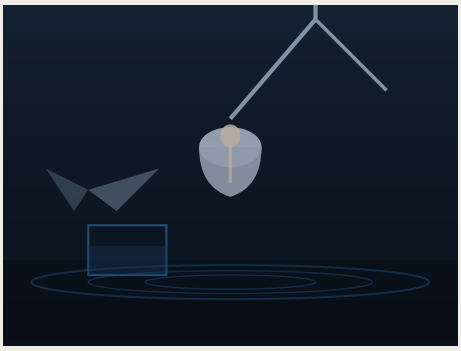
Sabsabi has transformed the Australia Pavilion into a contemplative environment exploring spiritual inquiry, migration and the vastness of shared humanity. Drawing on Sufi spiritual traditions, the installation uses painting, video and scent — including black oud — and the movement of visitors through the space references the circular movement of Whirling Dervishes.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

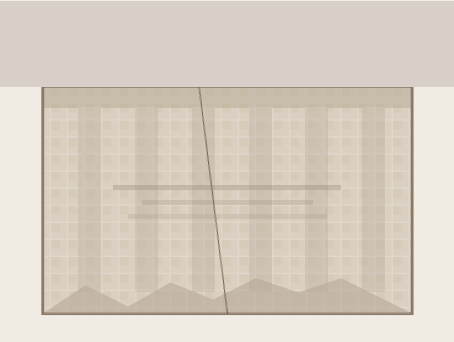
A quietly immersive, meditative experience. It invites you to reflect on what it means to belong somewhere, and what connects us across cultural and spiritual difference. Given everything Sabsabi went through to stand in that pavilion, it carries a particular weight.

VISUAL REFERENCE

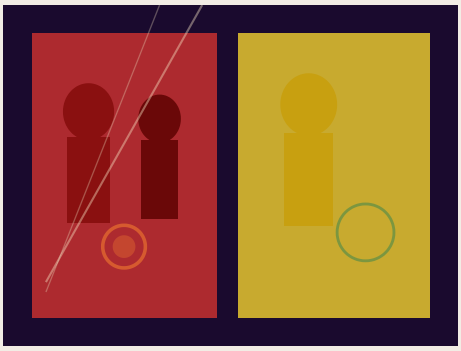
The Giardini Pavilions — A Glimpse



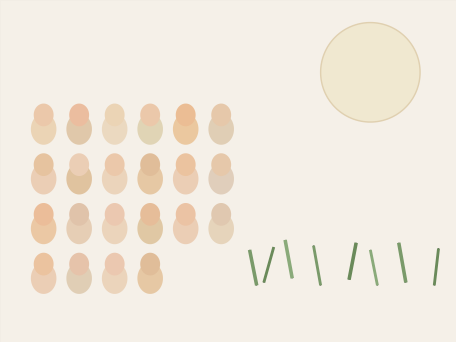
🇦🇹 **Austria**
Seaworld Venice — Florentina Holzinger



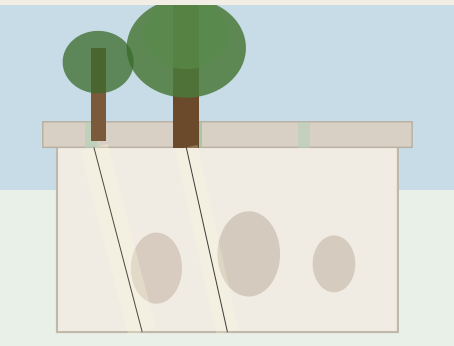
🇩🇪 **Germany**
Ruin — Sung Tieu & Henrike Naumann



🇬🇧 **United Kingdom**
Predicting History: Testing Translation — Lubaina Himid



🇯🇵 **Japan**
Grass Babies, Moon Babies — Ei Arakawa-Nash



🇳🇴🇫🇮🇸🇪 **Nordic Countries**
How Many Angels Can Dance on the Head of a Pin?

🇦🇺 **Australia**
conference of one's self — Khaled Sabsabi

Illustrative impressions of the works. All pavilions are located in the Giardini della Biennale and require a standard Biennale ticket.

PART FIVE

Free Satellite
Pavilions Around Venice

Most pavilions located outside the Giardini and Arsenale are free to enter and are spread across palaces, churches, and cultural spaces throughout the city. They are often less crowded and can be the most memorable encounters of the trip.

HOLY SEE FREE

The Ear Is the Eye of the Soul

Soundwalk Collective · Curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist & Ben Vickers

📍 *Two locations: Complesso di Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, Castello · and · Giardino Mistico dei Carmelitani Scalzi, Cannaregio (near the train station)*

WHAT WILL I SEE?

Rather than a conventional gallery show, this pavilion takes the form of a **sonic meditation** spread across two sacred sites. Its inspiration is Saint Hildegard of Bingen — the 12th-century abbess, composer, healer and visionary who believed that sound was a form of knowledge, a bridge between the human body and the cosmos.

At the walled Carmelite garden, visitors are invited to simply **listen**: to compositions by musicians and artists, and even to the bioelectric activity of plants converted into sound. At Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, the space becomes a living archive and contemporary scriptorium, developed with the St. Hildegard Academy.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

In a Biennale themed *In Minor Keys*, this feels entirely at home. A rare invitation to step out of the noise of Venice and experience art as contemplation rather than spectacle. Rich in themes of listening, meaning and language — perfect territory for English teachers.

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND FREE

Taharaki Skyside

Fiona Pardington

📍 *Istituto Santa Maria della Pietà, Riva degli Schiavoni, Castello — a short walk from the Giardini*

WHO IS SHE?

Born in 1961 in Auckland of Māori (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Mamoe, Ngāti Kahungunu) and Scottish descent, Fiona Pardington is one of New Zealand's most celebrated photographers. Her nearly five-decade practice revolves around photographing taonga — treasured objects — and museum specimens, probing themes of colonialism, cultural preservation, identity and memory. In 2016, she became the first New Zealand artist to be named a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French Government.

WHAT WILL I SEE?

Large-scale photographic portraits of taxidermied birds endemic to Aotearoa New Zealand — species held in South Canterbury museum collections. Pardington photographs them with extraordinary tenderness and intimacy: signs of taxidermic repair, stitched feathers, and worn surfaces remain visible, acknowledging both the fragility of the specimens and the histories attached to them. During a visit to Venice in 2024, she noticed similarities between the skies above the lagoon and those of her home region near Waimate in the South Island — and that connection of sky across distance is woven through the work.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

New Zealand won the Golden Lion at the 2024 Biennale with Mataaho Collective (and Australia won it the same year with Archie Moore), making Oceania the surprise cultural force of that edition. This pavilion continues that momentum with a deeply poetic meditation on extinction, colonial collecting, and the fragile thresholds between worlds. Quietly extraordinary.

THE BAHAMAS FREE

In Another Man's Yard

John Beadle & Lavar Munroe

📍 *San Trovaso Art Space, Dorsoduro 947*

WHAT WILL I SEE?

A posthumous collaboration between the late Bahamian artist John Beadle and contemporary artist Lavar Munroe. Beadle was originally slated to represent his country at the Biennale in 2015 — that presentation never came to be, and Beadle passed away in 2024. After his death, the Bahamian arts community rallied to give his work the international platform it had long deserved. The exhibition incorporates salvaged Junkanoo costumes and materials from Beadle's studio, including tiny handmade cardboard bird sculptures, exploring themes of memory, labour and overlooked histories.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

One of the most emotionally moving pavilions in the entire Biennale. The story behind it — of art that almost didn't happen, and a community that refused to let it disappear — is as powerful as the work itself.

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA FREE

Domus Diasporica

Mladen Bundalo

📍 *Palazzo Malipiero, San Marco 3198*

A poetic exploration of diaspora, home and belonging — what it means to carry a culture within you when you live somewhere else. Rich territory for English teachers thinking about identity, displacement and language. Housed in a beautiful San Marco palazzo.

CROATIA FREE

Compelled by Fright and Beauty

Dubravka Lošić

📍 *Palazzo Zorzi, Salizada Zorzi 4930, Castello*

A beautiful and atmospheric setting in the quieter eastern part of Castello. An exhibition exploring the dual forces of fear and beauty as driving impulses in human experience — easy to combine with a walk toward the Giardini.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO FREE

Simba Moto! Seize the Fire!

Sammy Baloji & ensemble

📍 *Old Refectory, Scuola Grande di San Marco — one of Venice's great Renaissance halls*

A spectacular venue in itself — one of the finest Renaissance interiors in Venice, usually closed to the public. The pavilion brings together a large cast of Congolese artists exploring fire, power and memory. The combination of the extraordinary room and the urgent contemporary work makes this one of the most talked-about off-site presentations.

PART SIX

Must-See Shows *Beyond the Biennale*

Venice in 2026 is exceptional even beyond the Biennale. Several of the world's most important living artists have major exhibitions in the city's most beautiful buildings. These are personal recommendations — not to be missed.

PAINTING · GRAND CANAL

Jenny Saville

📍 *Ca' Pesaro — International Gallery of Modern Art, Grand Canal · March 28 – November 22, 2026*

Born in Cambridge in 1970 and trained at Glasgow School of Art, Jenny Saville emerged in the 1990s as part of the Young British Artists generation — but her trajectory diverged sharply. While her YBA contemporaries chased media spectacle, Saville devoted herself obsessively to painting: to the raw, physical presence of the human body, rendered at enormous scale in oil paint.

This is her **first major Venice exhibition**, bringing together around 30 paintings from the 1990s to the present, including seminal works like *Hyphen* (1999) and *Reverse* (2002–13), alongside a new series of works created specifically in response to Venice. The setting is extraordinary: Ca' Pesaro is a Baroque marble palace on the Grand Canal, and Saville's monumental canvases will be in direct dialogue with the Venetian Old Masters. One critic called it "one of the most important painting exhibitions in Italy this year."

She broke the auction record for a living female artist in 2018 when her 1992 self-portrait *Propped* sold for £9.5 million. Seeing her work in person — at this scale, in these rooms — is a completely different experience.

Ticket: approx. €14 (combined with Museum of Oriental Art)

PERFORMANCE / INSTALLATION · DORSODURO

Marina Abramović

📍 *Gallerie dell'Accademia, Dorsoduro · May 6 – October 19, 2026*

When Marina Abramović first visited Venice as a 14-year-old girl, travelling from Belgrade with her mother, she stepped out of the train station and wept. More than six decades later, she returns as **the first living woman artist to be honoured with a major exhibition at the Gallerie dell'Accademia** — one of the most venerable institutions in the history of Western art, home to Titian, Tintoretto, Giorgione and Mantegna.

Born in Serbia in 1946 and now based between New York and Amsterdam, Abramović is the most famous performance artist alive. Her work is built on pushing the body and mind to extreme limits — in her infamous 1974 piece *Rhythm 0*, she invited gallery visitors to use 72 objects on her passive body, including a loaded gun. In 1988, she and her then-partner Ulay each walked the Great Wall of China from opposite ends for 90 days, meeting in the middle to end their relationship rather than marry as planned.

Transforming Energy marks her 80th birthday and places her "transitory objects" — sculptures involving crystals, quartz and other minerals — throughout the Accademia's permanent collection galleries. One of the most dramatic pairings: her *Pietà (with Ulay)* from 1983 in direct conversation with Titian's final, devastating *Pietà*. Do not rush this one.

Ticket: €15 full / €2 reduced (18–25) · Free first Sunday of month

CONTEMPORARY ART · GRAND CANAL

Helter Skelter: Arthur Jafa & Richard Prince

📍 *Fondazione Prada — Ca' Corner della Regina, Grand Canal · May 9 – November 23, 2026*

The exhibition that critics are calling the surprise hit of the entire Venice season. Curator Nancy Spector — former chief curator of the Guggenheim — has brought together American artists **Arthur Jafa** and **Richard Prince** in what sounds like an unlikely pairing but has proved electrifying in practice.

Richard Prince (b. 1949) is one of the most provocative figures in American art — famous (and infamous) for "rephotographing" other people's images and presenting them as his own, questioning originality and authorship at the heart of consumer culture. Arthur Jafa (b. 1960) is a filmmaker and artist whose work excavates Black American experience through found footage, photography and installation — his video *Love is the Message, the Message is Death* (2016) is considered one of the defining artworks of the last decade.

The show builds relationships between over fifty works including photography, video, installation and painting. It is housed in Ca' Corner della Regina, one of the most dramatically beautiful Baroque palazzi on the Grand Canal. Described by Artforum as "the talk of the town."

Ticket: €15 full / Free under 18

SCULPTURE & ARCHITECTURE · CANNAREGIO

Anish Kapoor: Palazzo Manfrin

📍 *Palazzo Manfrin, Fondamenta Venier, Cannaregio 342 · May 6 – August 8, 2026*

Indian-British sculptor Anish Kapoor (b. 1954, Mumbai) is one of the most significant artists of the last forty years. Best known to the general public for *Cloud Gate* (the "Bean") in Chicago's Millennium Park, his work explores the void, infinity, darkness and the limits of perception — often through objects that seem to absorb or dissolve the space around them.

Kapoor acquired the 16th-century **Palazzo Manfrin** in Cannaregio — one of Venice's great historic palaces — and established his foundation there in 2022. This exhibition opens the building to the public for only the second time, presenting architectural models and sculptures spanning 50 years of his practice, both realised and unrealised. A new iteration of his seminal suspended dome *At the Edge of the World* (1998) trades its famous red for black pigment. And his *Descent into Limbo* (1992) — a dark circular void set into the floor that appears bottomless — will remain at the foundation permanently.

Kapoor's Vantablack sculptures, made with the darkest material known to science, are also on display. Standing in front of them is a genuinely disorienting experience.

Ticket: check anishkapoor.com — timed entry required

Closes August 8

FILM & PHOTOGRAPHY · SAN MARCO

Shirin Neshat: Do U Dare!

📍 *Palazzo Marin, San Marco · May 8 – September 6, 2026*

Born in Qazvin, Iran in 1957, Shirin Neshat moved to California to study in the 1970s. When the Islamic Revolution erupted in 1979, she was unable to return home for many years. She has lived in New York ever since, and her work — photographs, films, installations — has explored the experience of exile, the female body under authoritarian control, and the clash between Eastern and Western worlds with extraordinary visual power. She won the Golden Lion at the 1999 Venice Biennale — so this city has deep resonance for her.

Do U Dare! is a new film trilogy inspired by the story of **Nasim Aghdam** — an Iranian-American woman who shot and wounded three people at YouTube's headquarters in 2018 before taking her own life. Neshat was immediately fascinated: Aghdam was a media personality, a vegetarian activist, a fitness influencer — whose social media accounts were described as "bizarre" but which Neshat read as something closer to video art. The trilogy follows a female protagonist through New York's social landscapes, shot in black and white, transitioning to colour as she enters interior spaces.

Neshat's work explores a paradox she knows personally: women who appear "submissive and quiet" in public but remain "rebellious and defiant" in private. Installed in the ornate 18th-century frescoed rooms of Palazzo Marin, the contrast with the gritty New York settings is part of the work.

Ticket: check event listing — likely free or low cost

Closes September 6

FASHION / ART / CRAFT · GRAND CANAL

Fondazione Dries Van Noten

📍 *Palazzo Pisani Moretta, Grand Canal, San Polo · April 25 – October 4, 2026*

One of the most buzzed-about new openings in Venice in years. Belgian fashion legend **Dries Van Noten** — who stepped back from his eponymous fashion house in 2024 after 38 years — has taken over the stunning 15th-century **Palazzo Pisani Moretta** on the Grand Canal and opened it to the public for the very first time in the building's history, as a cultural foundation dedicated to craftsmanship.

The inaugural exhibition, *The Only True Protest is Beauty*, unfolds across 20 rooms on three floors of the palazzo's piano nobile. It brings together over 200 works by more than 50 makers — spanning fashion, jewellery, ceramics, glass, art, design and photography — arranged not by logic but by instinct, creating unexpected proximities between disciplines. Christian Lacroix haute couture alongside Comme des Garçons; Venetian glass beside contemporary photography; ancient craft beside radical fashion.

Even if contemporary art isn't your thing, the palazzo itself is worth the visit. It is one of the finest examples of Venetian Gothic architecture on the Grand Canal, and was previously accessible only to guests of exclusive private events.

Membership from €20 (€10 under 26) · check fondazionedriesvannoten.org

Closes October 4

QUICK REFERENCE

Tickets & *Practical Information*

Biennale Ticket Prices

Adult (standard)	**€30**
Over 65 / Venice residents	**€20**
Students / Under 26	**€16**
Three-day pass	**€40 (consecutive days)**
Weekly pass	**€50 (7 consecutive days)**
Groups (10–25 people)	**Book online at labiennale.org**
Satellite pavilions (around the city)	**Mostly free**

Key Tips

Single tickets cover both venues. One entry to the Giardini and one entry to the Arsenale — these can be used on non-consecutive days, valid for the full run until 22 November.

Once you leave, you can't re-enter on the same ticket. Each venue is one admission only, so plan your visit and stay until you're done.

Closed Mondays except on specific dates (11 May, 1 June, 7 September and 16 November).

Book in advance — especially for group visits. Tickets only available online at labiennale.org.

Free first Sunday of the month at the Gallerie dell'Accademia (for the permanent collection).

The day access fee applies on 60 specific days across 2026 for day visitors (08:30–16:00) — check the official Venice day-tripper fee schedule before your visit.

A CLOSING ESSAY

How to *Look at Art*

A short guide for curious people

A note from Shelley

I have been immersed in fine art for as long as I can remember. My father was an artist, and I grew up in a world where art appreciation was simply part of how we moved through it. Later, a Masters in Art History deepened that immersion — spanning papers in Contemporary Art History, European Medieval and Renaissance Art, Netherlandish and Italian Baroque, Italian Cinema, Postmodernism and Postcolonial Studies. For a long time, this knowledge was professional currency. Understanding art was bound up with how I earned a living.

Now, as an ESL tutor, art has returned to what it has always been for me beneath all of that intellectual jargon — a passion, a private pleasure, my happy place.

What all those years of looking have taught me is perhaps the most counterintuitive lesson of all: the person who walks into a gallery without any of that background — without the canonical names and the chronologies — is not at a disadvantage. In certain important ways they are freer than I am.

I carry baggage. When I stand in front of a painting, I am also standing in front of everything I have ever read about it, every argument I once had to make, every framework I was trained to apply. That knowledge enriches the work, of course. It can also get in the way of simply feeling what is there.

You don't have that problem. You can walk in and let the work land on you directly, without the interference of everything you think you ought to think. There's a freedom in that which, frankly, most art historians have to work for years to recover.

Art has always been subjective, and stubbornly so. There is no correct response, and there never has been. A work of art isn't an equation waiting to be verified — it's an opening, an invitation, a question passed from one person to another across time. What it means to you is not a lesser version of what it means to me, or to a curator or a critic. It's simply yours.

This guide is written in that spirit. Not to tell you what art means, but to hand you a few tools for working out what it means to you — which is, in the end, the only answer that matters.

— Shelley

First: you already know how to do this

Nobody arrives in front of a painting as a blank slate. You have spent your whole life looking — at faces, at light on water, at the way a room feels when someone has just left it. You already know what beauty is to you. You know what unease feels like. You know when something repels you.

That is all you need to begin.

The idea that art requires specialist knowledge before you're allowed to respond to it is one of the great myths of cultural life — and a form of gatekeeping that leaves people feeling galleries aren't meant for them. A painting doesn't check your credentials before it affects you.

What art history and criticism can do is deepen an experience you've already had. They help you cross the threshold. They aren't the ticket requiring entry.

You complete the work

There is an idea, most famously expressed by Marcel Duchamp — the French artist often called the godfather of conceptual art — that a work of art is not finished by the artist at all. In a talk in 1957 he argued that the creative act is never performed by the artist alone: it is the spectator who brings the work into contact with the world, who deciphers and interprets it, and so — in his words — *the spectator makes the picture*. The artist begins it. You finish it.

I've found myself thinking about this in unlikely terms lately. In quantum physics there is a famous thought experiment — Schrödinger's cat — in which a cat sealed in a box is, until someone opens it, somehow both alive and dead at once: suspended across every possibility, resolving into one reality only at the moment of observation. The act of looking is what makes it real. *(A physicist would cringe — Schrödinger invented the cat to mock exactly this kind of loose talk. But let me borrow the poetry, if not the physics.)*

A painting on a wall in an empty room is a little like that closed box. It holds every possible meaning at once, and none of them, until someone walks in and looks. Your attention is what collapses all that potential into something actual — this colour, this feeling, this particular afternoon. No one before you has ever completed it in quite the way you are about to. No one after you will either.

So you arrive at every gallery already holding half the work. The painting, or object, waits in its box of possibilities, and you are the one who opens it. It does not fully exist until you walk in.

Slow down

If I could give you one piece of advice for any art exhibition, it would be this: spend more time in front of fewer works.

Most of us, especially somewhere as vast as the Biennale, move too fast. We cover ground, tick off pavilions, photograph everything on our phones before we've actually looked at any of it. We leave having seen a great deal and felt very little.

Try the opposite. Find one work that pulls at you — even slightly, even uncomfortably — and stay with it for five minutes. That sounds like nothing, but in a gallery it's a long time. Let your eyes wander across it. Notice what you keep returning to, and what you keep avoiding.

The art historian T.J. Clark once observed that most people spend less time in front of a painting than it takes to read the label beside it. The label is not the painting.

You may find yourself in Lubaina Himid's rooms in the British Pavilion — vivid, busy, easy to walk straight through. But the visitors who stop and stay are the ones who begin to notice the hands, the postures, the small stories gathering at the edges of the frame. Five minutes becomes twenty. That's the painting doing its work. I once stood in front of Van Gogh's *Starry Night* at MoMA in New York for what I thought was ten minutes. It was an hour. I'd hardly blinked.

You don't have to like it

The goal of looking at art isn't necessarily to arrive at appreciation. It's to arrive at a genuine response, whatever that turns out to be.

Confusion counts. So does discomfort. Even boredom tells you something — about the gap between what the work is doing and what you walked in expecting. Irritation in front of something other people find profound is worth sitting with. Why does this annoy me? What was I expecting instead?

We've all heard it. Possibly said it. Standing in front of something large and abstract, arms folded: *"I could have done that."* Perhaps. But you didn't. And that, it turns out, is the whole point. The idea came from a particular person, at a particular moment in their life, in response to something they'd seen or felt or lost or needed to understand. The execution — however simple it may seem — probably isn't at all, and was the result of years spent working out what to strip back, and which single gesture might carry the weight of everything that couldn't be said any other way. Simplicity in art is almost never accidental. Usually it took the longest to reach.

Contemporary art especially tends to resist easy likability, which is often what throws people. It isn't always trying to be beautiful. It might be trying to be true, or unsettling, or to make you see something you've been trained not to. "But is it art?" is a far less interesting question than "what is this doing to me, and why?"

You might walk into the Austrian Pavilion and feel overwhelmed, even repelled. Florentina Holzinger's *Seaworld Venice* is built to unsettle — it puts the body in extremis inside a world that is flooding, decaying, performing its own collapse. If it makes you want to leave, notice that impulse. Stay a moment longer than is comfortable. That discomfort is the work talking to you.

What curators actually do

It helps to understand the curator's role, because it changes how you move through a show. An art curator is a kind of alchemical conduit between the artist, their work, the space and the viewer. Their job isn't simply to hang art on walls. It's to spark curiosity, and to create conversations between works that might never have spoken to each other in isolation. A painting that feels opaque or cold alone in a white room can crack open when something unexpected is set beside it — a textile, a film, a sound piece, an object from another century or another continent.

The Biennale is one of the world's great curatorial stages. As you move through it, watch not just the individual works but the relationships between them. A lot of the meaning lives in those gaps.

Some questions to carry with you

When you're standing in front of something and don't know where to begin, try these.

What's the first thing I noticed? Not the most important thing — the first. Follow that instinct. It's rarely random.

What is this made of, and does that matter? Materials carry meaning. A work made of ash says something different from one made of gold leaf. Stone carries permanence. A video looping on a screen says something about time and repetition. Ask why this, and not something else.

What does it remind me of? Not in art — in life. A smell, a memory, a feeling you once had in a particular room. Contemporary art often works by reaching for associations you didn't know you were carrying.

What's been left out? Every artwork is also a set of decisions about what not to include. The empty areas of a painting, the silence in a sound piece, the absence in a photograph — these matter as much as what's present.

How does it make me feel in my body? Odd question, but it counts. Do you want to step closer, or back away? Does it make you feel small? Calm? Held? Exposed? The body tends to respond before the mind catches up.

Who made this, and from where? Context doesn't explain a work, but it can unlock it. Khaled Sabsabi's *conference of one's self* in the Australian Pavilion is a good example. The work is beautiful even if you know nothing about him. But knowing he spent years fighting for the right to stand in that room — that his own country first revoked his invitation — changes it completely.

On contemporary art

Contemporary art can feel hostile to newcomers because it so often refuses to do what we expect art to do. It doesn't always depict anything you can name. It doesn't always reach for beauty. It can seem to be withholding something — an explanation, or a meaning just out of reach.

That withholding is usually deliberate. A lot of contemporary artists are interested in durational experience: work that reveals itself slowly, or differently each time you meet it, or only three days later when you're doing the washing up and something suddenly clicks.

A few things that may help.

Read the title. Titles in contemporary art are rarely literal. Think of them as a third voice in the room — a clue left deliberately incomplete. *How Many Angels Can Dance on the Head of a Pin?*, the Nordic Pavilion's title, sounds whimsical until you learn it was a medieval question about infinity and the limits of what we can know. Then the whole show tilts.

Trust your body before your head. If a room makes you feel a certain way before you've read the wall text, take it seriously. Start there.

Let yourself be lost. Being lost in front of a work isn't failure — often it's where the real encounter begins. The pieces that confuse or unsettle us at first are often the ones we remember longest.

Forget about value. Whether something is famous or expensive is a distraction. Stand in front of the thing itself.

On paintings in particular

A painting is a record of decisions made by a person standing — or sitting, or lying — in front of a surface, making marks. Every brushstroke is a choice. Every colour was mixed at a particular moment, in a particular mood.

Scale matters more than people expect. Think of the Mona Lisa at the Louvre — surprisingly smaller than almost everyone imagines, behind glass, surrounded by crowds, and somehow still magnetic. Turning around, on the opposite wall hangs Delacroix's cinematic *Liberty Leading the People*, nearly three metres tall, all fury and smoke and forward motion, so physically commanding you can almost smell the gunpowder. Two enigmatic paintings in the same room; two completely different bodily experiences. The tension between them — which you occupy as a physical presence in that space — speaks to something extraordinary: that while Delacroix's gargantuan masterpiece commands the room, it cannot overshadow the reputation of arguably the most famous painting on the planet. And the Mona Lisa, for her part, seems to know this. That wry, inscrutable smirk; that all-knowing gaze directed, as ever, at no one in particular and everyone at once.

When you stand in front of a large painting — and Jenny Saville's canvases at Ca' Pesaro are very large, and very close to the skin — you're standing before something built at human scale, for a human body to encounter. It was made to be *with*, not just looked *at*. Get close enough to see the surface. The pigment, the ridges, the transparencies, the accidents — all of it is part of the meaning.

If a painting shows a figure, look at the hands. Look at where the gaze drifts — is it confronting you directly, or are you the voyeur? And look at the edges of the canvas, where the painter's attention may have relaxed, and where you sometimes find the most honest marks.

The Looking List

A checklist to carry into any gallery

Use this in front of any work that stops you — painting, sculpture, video, installation. There are no right answers. The point is to slow down and notice.

FIRST CONTACT

- [ ] What was the very first thing I noticed?
- [ ] Where did my eyes go next?
- [ ] Did my body want to move closer or step back?
- [ ] What's my gut feeling, before I read anything?

THE WORK ITSELF

- [ ] What is this actually made of?
- [ ] How big is it — and does its size matter?
- [ ] Is there colour? What is the dominant colour doing to the mood?
- [ ] Is there a figure, a face, a body? Where is the gaze directed?
- [ ] What's happening at the edges — the corners, the periphery?
- [ ] What's been left out, covered over, or hidden?
- [ ] Is there text, sound, smell, or movement involved?

GOING DEEPER

- [ ] What does the title add — or withhold?
- [ ] What does this remind me of from my own life, not from art?
- [ ] Does it make me feel anything in my body — tension, calm, vertigo, warmth?
- [ ] What would I say this work is about, in one sentence?
- [ ] What would I say it's *really* about, underneath that?

THE ARTIST

- [ ] What do I know, or want to know, about who made this?
- [ ] Where are they from, and does that change how I read the work?
- [ ] What might they have been trying to say that couldn't be said any other way?

AFTER

- [ ] If I had to describe this to someone who couldn't see it, what would I say?
- [ ] What am I still thinking about — even if I can't explain why?
- [ ] Would I come back to this? Why or why not?

"The only way to know a painting is to look at it. The only way to look at it is to be there."

— T.J. CLARK

The oldest impulse

To make art is one of the oldest and most human of impulses — older than writing, older than cities, older than history itself. The first artists walked into dark caves forty thousand years ago, pressed their hands to the rock and blew pigment around them, leaving a mark that still says: *I was here. I felt something. I existed.*

That impulse hasn't changed. Only the materials have. And every time you stand in front of a work and let it become real, you're standing at the other end of that same forty-thousand-year communion.

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